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Reflections on the Education of African American Children: A Preliminary Study of Retired Versus Current African American Educators

Andwatta L. Barnes

Grand Valley State University

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Reflections on the Education of African American Children:
A Preliminary Study of Retired Versus Current African American Educators

Andwatta L. Barnes
McNair Scholar

Faite R-P. Mack, Ph.D.
Faculty Mentor

ABSTRACT:
A survey of retired and current African American educators was conducted to collect reflections on the education of African-American children from several recent decades. Ten recommendations for increasing the number of African American educators were derived and are included.

Context for the Study
America is experiencing a crisis in the shortage of minority teachers and administrators. In the United States, where 12 percent of the population and 16.5 percent of the public school children are African American, only 7.4 percent of educators are African American (Henry, 1997). As a result of retirement and declining enrollment in teacher education programs, it is predicted that the number of African American educators will drop to approximately 4 percent by the year 2000 (Mack & Jackson, 1996).

Why do so few African Americans enter the field of teaching when the needs are so great? This research addresses this question and provides findings obtained by surveying current and retired African American educators regarding the recruitment of African American teachers, the current status of African American students in public schools, and predictions about the educational future of African American children.

Recruiting Minority Teachers
According to the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (1987), a quality education requires that all students be exposed to a variety of cultural perspectives that represent a nation at large. Such exposure can be accomplished only via a multiethnic teaching force in which racial and ethnic groups are included at a level of parity with their numbers in the overall population. Dillard (1994), Gordon (1993), Montecinos (1994), and others (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Gay, 1990; King, 1993) passionately maintain that teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds will engage in culturally relevant pedagogy and that these teachers will be more likely than their white counterparts to embrace approaches to multicultural education that seek to enhance the social status of minority groups. Most importantly, all children, not just minority students, should experience and can benefit from a diverse, multiethnic teaching force (Mack & Jackson, 1990; Banks & Banks, 1994).

School districts and teacher educators have continued to express their concern about the critical under-representation of African Americans in the profession of teaching (Banks, 1991, 1994; Case et al., 1996; Goertz & Pitcher, 1985; American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 1994). Since 1980 the number of African American students enrolled in public schools has been rising, while the availability of African American teachers has been falling. According to Hodgkinson (1993), minority students will constitute approximately 33 percent of the total K–12 school enrollment in the United States; however, only 12 percent of the total K–12 teachers are from minority groups (Choy, 1993). It is predicted that by the year 2000, nearly 40–to–50 percent of the students in the K–12 grades will be minority, and minority students will comprise the majority of school students in 53 of the nation's largest cities (Goertz & Pitcher, 1985; American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 1994).

In contrast, a survey of teacher-preparatory institutions in 47 states and the District of Columbia revealed that enrollments in undergraduate elementary education programs had representation as follows: 6.4 percent were African American, 3.4 percent were Hispanic, and 0.8 percent were Asian American, and 0.5 percent were Native Americans. Of those undergraduates preparing to teach at the high school level, only 5.7 percent were African American, 4.0 percent were Hispanic, 0.8 percent were Asian American, and 0.6 percent were Native American. Of those undergraduates preparing to teach special education, only 6.6 percent were African American, 3.1 percent were Hispanic, 0.5 percent were Asian American, and 0.5 percent were Native American. Of prospective teacher
candidates, 81 percent of teachers were female (nearly 90 percent in elementary education), 92 percent were white, less than 3 percent were functional in a language other than English, and only 9 percent reported that they would choose to teach in urban or multicultural settings (21st Century, 1991).

The downturn in African American educators has been so dramatic that some authors (Cole, 1986; Irvine, 1988; NEA poll, 1992; Tewel & Trubowitz, 1987) have referred to African American educators as an "endangered species," and a "drastically scarce resource" (Graham, 1987). The implications are that most teachers teaching today's children are European American, and that tomorrow's teaching force will be even more so. According to W.A. Smith (1988), with the existing minority teaching force, students who have about 40 teachers during their precollegiate years can expect to encounter only two to three who are members of a minority group during their entire school career.

Gordon (1993) contended that, throughout the seventies and into the eighties, the shortage of African American teachers was embedded in a context of school desegregation, higher education elitism, racism, poverty, and urban decay. A much larger potential supply of teachers exists among ethnic and urban communities than is evident from the current minority student enrollment in teacher education programs in universities with traditionally white student bodies. Gordon suggested that while racism and poverty have slowed academic achievement in urban communities, and the lack of active recruitment and community partnerships on the part of teacher education programs has also contributed to the low enrollment of students of color in those programs. She contended as well that the inertia of the teaching profession and its training programs has added to this situation, resulting in selection criteria for recruitment which perpetuate stereotypes of teaching. These stereotypes are based on the typical teacher at middle-class suburban schools, and the consequences are increased testing and longer training programs for minority students.

Is it important to have an adequate supply of African American educators for the nation's schools? African American professionals in America's schools serve as role models for both African American and majority students. According to Leonard et al. (1980), African American educators tend to be the professional role models having the earliest contact with young children, providing valuable models of successful African American individuals who are contributing members of society. They also give credence to the viability of education as an acceptable career path to upward mobility for African American populations (Graham, 1987; Rancier, 1993).

Non-minority students also benefit from the opportunity to experience minority teachers. Interacting with minority educators will result in increased familiarity with minorities and their culture(s), and experience seeing them in professional roles will lead to higher expectations in others for minority group members (Middleton et al., 1988). Without sufficient exposure to minority teachers throughout their education, both African American and majority students come to characterize the teaching profession, and the academic enterprise in general, as better suited for European Americans (Terrell, 1995). As the proportion of European American teachers grows, role modeling that might encourage African American students to pursue careers in education decrease, possibly further enlarging the already inadequate ratio of African American teachers to African American pupils in the schools.

Page and Page (1984) found the variable which best determines if students will consider teaching is simply whether or not other individuals have discussed the career choice with them. In their study, the majority of students had never had anyone talk to them about selecting the teaching profession as their occupational choice. Barry et al. (1989), in a series of personal interviews with high school sophomores in three states regarding their perceptions of teaching as a career, discovered that:

1. For both regular and advanced students, 5.8 percent indicated an interest in becoming a teacher;
2. Only 2 percent of the advanced students indicated an interest in teaching as a prospective career;
3. Most students—regardless of race, gender, or school location—expressed negative opinions about teaching as career alternative, with reasons that included poor pay, boring and routine work, lack of autonomy, limited opportunities for advancement, and frustrating working conditions;
4. Students reported being discouraged from teaching by their own teachers and by parents who are teachers.

It has also been shown that many students from African American backgrounds do not clearly recognize the connection between schooling and careers, although they often aspire to careers that require college degrees (Blackwater Associates, 1989). Often students from historically under-represented groups lack information and counseling on the things to do in high school that will qualify them for professional careers.

A report by Alliance 2000 (1994) suggests that there are students of great potential who have had inadequate preparation in public schools. These students
lack an adequate understanding of the prerequisites and requirements of a college education and can profit from programs and supports that will steer them toward success in higher education. The first steps toward attracting these students into teacher education programs, therefore, involve the efforts necessary to ensure that these students enter college in the first place.

Study Methodology
This study used 18 open-ended questions, implementing the community nomination process to select the sample from three Michigan communities (Grand Rapids, Muskegon Heights, and Muskegon). The community nomination process, a term coined by Foster (1990), refers to the strategy whereby educators were selected by direct contact with African American educators. Periodicals, community organizations, and individuals provided the names of the educators involved in this study. A total of 39 educators were interviewed, 25 current educators and 14 retired educators. These educators ranged in age from 24 to 82, the majority in their forties and fifties, and their years of teaching experience from 2 to 42 years.

The sample was asked about their schooling experiences at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels, their current and previous teaching positions, their views regarding efforts to recruit more African American individuals into the field of teacher education, and their personal philosophies and pedagogies of education. As the surveys occurred during the summer session, most were interviewed in their homes, and their responses were recorded for later transfer to print and analysis. Audio tapes were transcribed using a modified version of the domain analysis procedure, which proved to be a costly and time-consuming process. Key themes related to the recruitment of African American teachers were identified.

Findings: Summary of Educators’ Recommendations
Ten recommendations were made by this sample as means of increasing the effort to increase African American representation in the field of education:

1. Provide career change opportunities in teaching for minorities with degrees outside of teacher education, especially targeting areas that may be suffering industrial and governmental downsizing.

2. Provide career ladder opportunities for non-certified school employees by offering certification opportunities through evening and weekend study.

3. Engage in active publicity campaigns that communicate the employment rewards and employment opportunities offered by teaching, focusing on an African American audience.

4. Establish pre-college programs involving African American high school and middle school students designed to channel them toward careers in education. These programs could range from early intervention in the middle grades, to summer workshops and tutorial opportunities for high school students, to structured high school teacher preparation programs designed to grow their own teachers, such as the model used in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

5. Expand scholarship programs, work-study, and summer employment opportunities for teacher education candidates who are willing to work in inner-city schools.

6. Establish “magnet” middle and high schools that have a teaching career theme.

7. Encourage successful African American educators to serve as mentors for high school and college students interested in the field of teacher education, using a theme of “reach one, recruit one.”

8. Use models like the National Teacher Corps, Teach for America, and the Urban Teacher Education Program (Indiana University Northwest, Gary Indiana).

9. Initiate closer working partnerships between experienced African American teachers and teacher educators that can enhance efforts for preparing pre-service teachers. The declining pool of African American teachers must be empowered to share their knowledge and experience in the urban setting with teacher educators and pre-service students.

10. Employ successful African American educators as instructional faculty in programs designed to attract minorities into the field of teacher education.

Discussion
As the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986) noted, the diminution in the number of minority teachers has an adverse effect on all students, majority as well as minority. The race and the background of their teachers often tells students something about authority and power in contemporary America, and these messages influence students’ attitudes, their view of their own, and others’ intrinsic worth. The views they form in school about justice and fairness may influence how they view the status of their own citizenship.

Left unchecked, the declining participation of minorities in teacher education will have repercussions for future generations of Americans. The field of teacher education risks developing an educational
and economic underclass, establishing the teaching profession as being reserved only for European Americans. As well, Mack and Jackson (1996) contend that the lack of available minority teachers to provide ethnic role models in the schools could also contribute to underachievement of minority students, provide little incentive for minority students to advance in school, and negatively affect their career and life aspiration.

As Savelbergh (1994) asks, “Who will better understand the Hispanic, Asian, or African American student than the Hispanic, Asian, or African American teacher?” If the nation’s schools are to reflect the model of a “just society,” minorities will have to be empowered by an equitable representation of teachers and school administrators, and a guarantee that teacher education is inclusive rather than exclusive. As stated by Boyer (1990), Americans must recognize that inequality is rooted in the society at large, and it falls on higher education to have an unequivocal commitment to social justice.

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